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The Return to Romanticism

BY RICHARDSON WRIGHT



NLY the ignorant and the very young do not watch for the back-swing of the pendulum. Revolt was to be expected after the world had lived under four years of strict military discipline. After four years of stupendous production it was logical that tired labor should produce less and demand a more equitable wage and hour scale. In the same fashion it is to be expected that people who have faced the stark realities of war and its aftermaths of unrest, plague, poverty and mental weariness should turn for sustenance to those things of which dreams are made.

The less sophisticated people have always taken romance as an anodyne. The servant girl devours society notes; that is probably why our newspapers print them. The more romantic and sentimental the verse is, the greater is its popularity. These people do not read romance for its beauty, but because it gives them another world to dream in when they can slip away from that in which they live. The more sophisticated the audience or reading public, the slower is it to demand the swing of the pendulum, and the slower, therefore, will be the return from all the realism of the books and plays with which we have been deluged during the past four years. For the sophisticated audience desires, just as does the unsophisticated, the retreat from realities. We have yet to see a return to romanticism in fiction, but there is every evidence of a return to romanticism in the drama.

It would require considerable space to define romanticism in all its phases. Perhaps we had better be content with saying the romanticism seeks to present the unreal realistically. It makes the unrecallable past live again. It puts

flesh and blood into ghosts of a day long since dead. It transports one to a dominion that eye has never and never will see. In the shadowy dream-world life is made up of things not as they are, but as we would like them to be. Therein lies the secret of the eternal fascination. It is also a world where youth is paramount; and perhaps that explains the hold romance has over all normal human beings—the longing in all of us for things that are young.

Whether romanticism finds its expression in the costume play, the historic play or in a play set in a distant or imaginary country, the effect is the same—to carry the audience for one brief moment out of the stark realism of these present circumstances to the pleasantly romantic other-world where only sufficient realism is evident to make it plausible.

One of the world's long distance theatre runs was *Chu Chin Chow* in London. England flocked to that Far East pageant. It made them forget. And London in those four years of war had a great deal to forget. New York did not flock to it in such droves, because we had so little to forget. Had *Chu Chin Chow* been presented here after we had been in the war a year, it might have met with better success.

London today is flocking to *Jack O Jingles*, a highly romantic, colorful, swashbuckling play of those delightfully exciting days that Alfred Noyes describes in his *The Highwayman*. London also went to the great inconvenience of traveling to Hammersmith to see John Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln*, an historic play or, rather, a play built up around a character that is historic to the Briton.

In New York Shakespeare has had an

excellent season so far, due, in a measure, to the fact that it was superbly presented, and in another to the fact (I am herewith inviting the thunderbolts!) that Shakespeare is the master *par excellence* of the costume play. Theatre-goers also kept up the box receipts of *The Jest* to a staggering figure, although this is the second season for that highly romantic costume tragedy.

We are apt to mistake comedy for romance. The worst offender in this respect is the bedroom farce, of which the name is legion just now. The modern bedroom set, however gorgeously arranged, is a realistic, everyday scene. It doesn't transport one from this all too realistic circumstance of living. Neither do those plays tinged with an aftermath of war, these pretty comedies in which the handsome French officer wears his red breeches. We are too familiar with red breeches to register enthusiasm. The war is too near us to command interest.

Which leads to the question of how much time must pass before realism fades into romanticism, before the soldierly hero's helmet becomes the halo of a saint. Certainly fifty years must pass—even more.

The most recent example of the people responding to highly colored romance is to be found in the reception that has been accorded Lord Dunsany in America, both by the reading and the play-going public. Here is a poet who discards all our known formulæ of time and space and creates entirely new worlds of his own. These are improbable, bizarre, supremely the stuff of dreams and therefore, essentially romantic. They are filled with gods that we have never known before and people strangely remote and suddenly human. Our imagination is stimulated and we are carried away from realities that are harsh to unknown, distance-softened things that are new. This is the very essence of romance. Materlinck, too, possesses this power of transporting. He takes us over the whole world in search of an ideal, the most romantic quest possible. The master of them all, how-

ever, is Barrie. In *Dear Brutus* we are taken from a realistic present to a romantic future, cleansed, and brought back again. The same scheme is employed in *The Admirable Crichton*—a family and its servants are transported to a sort of Robinson Crusoe island where the social scales are tipped over; and then, a changed family, brought back again. *The Kiss for Cinderella* uses the dream interlude for its romanticism as a contrast to the raw realism of the slavey's life. *Peter Pan* presents the same contrast within the limits of its scenes. Even in his one act plays you are conscious that Barrie is constantly treading the frontier of an unseen, impossible land. Recall *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals*, and you remember how the cellar room is glorified by her constant journeys into the bewilderingly beautiful other world.

Upon this impossible other-worldliness romanticism lives, without it the drama would die. That is the secret of the costume play. It depends upon the plausible realism of by-gone clothing, ancient settings, a forgotten gallantry. Give us another *If I Were King*, another *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, and see how quickly people would flock to them, even the discerning who are loudest in their applause when any remnant of mediaevalism falls. Give us another and perhaps a pleasanter *Jest*, and it will receive ample support. For we must not forget that mediaevalism and all that it stood for is far from dead. It is a latent inclination that springs to applause whenever mediaevalism is brought upon the stage.

Give us even another such melodrama as *Shenandoah*, and we will support it. In fact, give us any decent, clean presentation of a world away from this world, of a life in which war and social unrest and weariness do not figure. For the pendulum must swing back. The discerning and fastidious play-goer demands it of his stage today. Because of these facts we can safely hope for a return to romanticism in the not too distant future.